

## Jean Nouvel at Storefront for Art & Architecture

In November of 1995, architect Jean Nouvel will transform the interior of Storefront for Art and Architecture into a matrix of real and virtual spaces in conjunction with the first ever exhibition of this French architect's work in the United States. Storefront's physical reality poses substantial working obstacles--an odd shape and unconventional proportions, a dominant exterior facade and a visible history through its component parts. Jean Nouvel's work has thrived under this type of circumscription and through challenges that others would shy away from.

Founded in 1982, Storefront for Art and Architecture brings into question the manner in which we construct the space we live and work. The exhibitions and events at Storefront look into the extraordinary ways people invent to form places, thoughts and things. Often occupying a place at the intersection of several fields--from art and architecture to agriculture and planning to comparative politics and history--Storefront asserts that these fields are not only related but inextricably linked to each other and to their context. In 1993, a collaborative project between artist Vito Acconci and architect Steven Holl transformed Storefront's facade into a built symbol of itself, an interlocking arrangement of moveable components that both describe a dynamic flexibility and demonstrate a commitment to realizing it.

Jean Nouvel is committed to the type of critical, multi-disciplinary investigations that exemplify Storefront's ideals. From his early activism with the *Mars '76* group's street-level planning and the *Syndicat de l'Architecture's* valiant stand against the destruction of *Les Halles*, Nouvel began a long-standing involvement with the city and its inherent vitality. Architecture, for Mr. Nouvel, is not an autonomous practice, but a forum that introduces suggestions and requirements of culture and civilization into the built world. These suggestions include specific context and conditions--function, urban street, tight budget, zoning limitations, local ordinances that can either be burdensome, or in Mr. Nouvel's case present a particular theme, however vexing, to incorporate, embrace and triumph over. In combination with this responsiveness, Jean Nouvel has a passionate interest in theater, cinema and image which is evident in the panoramic vistas he integrates, elements he frames and the rhythm of forms and materials he incorporates into his work. Through these influences, Nouvel shaped a philosophy that has generated projects that are at once harmoniously integrated into their surroundings and eloquently defiant of limited expectations.

Shaped like an acute triangle, Storefront's interior is 12' wide at its widest point and 85' long. This wedge imposes extraordinary restrictions due to both its restrictive proportions, the limited natural light that penetrates to the interior, and the myriad necessary functions that occur on the premises. Administrative, exhibition, event and production space along with a small bookstore and handicapped-accessible bathroom are shoe-horned into these cramped quarters that accommodate large numbers of visitors daily. Thus, utility and efficiency are of utmost concern while design, architectural articulation and public involvement are programmatically demanded.

Jean Nouvel's proposal incorporates both the principles embodied in Storefront's program and the building's context to organize the diverse concerns into an overall coherence with individual characters. To suggestively expand the limited space, Mr. Nouvel will invite a hazy distinction between interior and exterior. Expanding further while not straying beyond the physical confines, materials with physically and visually lighter associations will serve to counteract the presence of heavy iron beams and a concrete-clad exterior. An underutilized basement space will be integrated into the ground level.

In an effort to organize the functions of the space, each will be "coded" with different attention to material treatments all unified by consistent representative graphic elements. Each of these functions will be developed to exemplify the heights of their own expressiveness--thus, instead of a brutalist approach to stripping a space of its layers of experience and instead of a preservationist stance that would pretend to ignore that the world has changed, Mr. Nouvel plans to acknowledge both the history and the potential of site and specific.

Storefront for Art & Architecture believes that the American audience, particularly here in New York with its history of limited space will benefit tremendously from seeing both an exhibition of projects by Mr. Nouvel and the site-specific intervention. Limited space and money Jean Nouvel contends is no need for limited vision. Mr. Nouvel's history of finding ways to not only fight restrictions and stereotypes but embrace them and shake off low expectations is vital. As we re-consider our preassumptions of our collective and personal space and come to terms with the fact that it is not only finite but also has an implicit social function, Jean Nouvel's work is a singularly sensitive and convincing voice to hear.

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